

Foreign Affairs

THOMAS L. FRIEDMAN

*Drilling
In the
Cathedral*

Listening to President Bush's speech about his budget the other night, you could hear the theme song for his administration: "Don't Start Thinkin' About Tomorrow."

The short translation of the Bush speech is: Hey, it's not the government's money, it's *your* money. It's not your children's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, it's *your* refuge, and you can drill for oil there if you want. It's not *your* national debt, it's *your* grandchildren's national debt.

Geez, and they said the Clintonites were self-absorbed — me-me, I-I, now-now, yuppies. What about this crowd?

I'll let the experts point out the irresponsibility built into the Bush budget. As my colleague Paul Krugman, a real economist, has deftly explained, there is no way Mr. Bush's budget numbers can work without making wildly optimistic surplus projections, or stealing from future generations, or taking risks no serious person would take with his family's budget.

Having just visited Alaska, though, I'm troubled by what such thinking can do to the environment. What happened to the word "conservation"? Has it gone the way of "liberal"? Are we no longer allowed to call for conservation without engendering catcalls? America has 5 percent of the world's population, but consumes nearly 25 percent of world oil supplies. Yes, some speechwriter

did slip one reference to conservation into Mr. Bush's speech, but only after he first emphasized his favored approach to our energy deficit — more "production."

I could understand, if we were down to our last barrels of oil and our very lifestyle were threatened, that we might risk believing the oil companies that they can drill in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, in northern Alaska, without damage. But we are so far away from that. We have not even begun to explore how just a little conservation, or a small, painless increase in energy efficiency, could relieve us from even thinking about risking one of the earth's most pristine environments.

Check out the Web site of the Natural Resources Defense Council (www.NRDC.org). It notes that the most credible estimates indicate that the Arctic Refuge contains about 3.2 billion barrels of economically recoverable crude oil — less than America consumes in six months. Risking the Arctic Refuge to extract that pittance of oil is nuts, when it could be painlessly extracted through better conservation and efficiency. As the Defense Council points out, by simply increasing average fuel efficiency on new cars, S.U.V.'s and light trucks from 24 to 39 miles per gallon over the next decade, we would save 51 billion barrels of oil — more than 15 times the likely yield from the Arctic. At the same time, if we just required replacement tires for cars and light trucks to be as fuel-efficient as the original tires on new vehicles (which have lower rolling resistance), we would save 5.4 billion barrels of oil over the next 50 years, far more than in the Arctic Refuge.

The Arctic Refuge is a unique environmental cathedral — a 19-million-acre expanse where mountains meet ocean, where grizzly bears meet polar bears, where 130,000 caribou migrate each spring to give birth on the coastal plain, where an entire ecosystem is preserved and where Mother Nature is totally in charge. This is not Yellowstone Park, with campsites and R.V.'s. The original idea behind the refuge's creation was to save an area of pure wilderness, in which there would be no maps, virtually no roads and no development. When the Bush team says it can drill in such wilderness without harming it, it's like saying you can do online

trading in church on your Palm Pilot without disturbing anyone. It violates the very ethic of the place.

"Wilderness as a concept is immutable," explains Richard Fineberg, an Anchorage-based environmental consultant. "It is like perfection — there are no degrees to it. Oil development in a wilderness, no matter how sensitive, changes the very nature of it. It means it's no longer wilderness. If the drill worshipers prevail in the Arctic Refuge, then there will be no place on this continent where a unique environment will be safe from greed and short-term interests."

What will you tell your grandchildren when they ask: How could you destroy a unique wilderness area to buy six months' supply of gasoline? Why didn't you just improve gas mileage a little each year? Why didn't you lift just a tiny finger for conservation? Weren't you thinking about tomorrow at all? □

What part of 'pure wilderness' don't they understand?